

Citizen-Saints

by Ray C. Stedman

This is a tremendous passage on the subject of the Christian's relationship to government.

If we are Christians, where is our citizenship? Heaven. Do you remember Philippians 3:20, which says "our citizenship is in heaven, from whence we look for the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ"? In other parts of Scripture we are told that the character of Christians journeying through the world is that of pilgrims and strangers. We are citizens of heaven, journeying through this earthly time, and heaven is our home.

If this is true, does it mean that we are not to have anything to do with the government and politics of earth? Not at all; and this is the subject that is discussed in Romans 13, because it would be easy to get an unbalanced attitude from the passages which set forth the very real truth that believers have a citizenship beyond the earth. Like all truth, it must be held in balance, and this is one area where we definitely need to see the other side.

This passage is a full discussion of the attitude of the Spirit-filled Christian toward all governmental authority.

We are going to look at Verses 1-7 as they are summed up for us in just three phrases: God's institutions, God's instruments, and God's intruders. We will explain that last word more fully when we come to it.

Now let's look together at the first section, **God's institutions:**

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. {Rom 13:1 RSV}

This declares that the authority behind the authorities is God. I feel that this is a lot easier to preach here in America than it would be in China

or Russia today, but it is still true in those countries as much as it is here. All the governments that exist are of God.

It is hard to come to grips with that, isn't it? We like to think that God is behind governments like America and England, but that he has nothing to do with governments like Russia and China. (Some of us think that perhaps India and Yugoslavia are doubtful, and a few others that we could list.) But Paul makes the flat statement that those governments that exist are instituted by God – regardless of what their nature is like.

Remember when the Lord Jesus stood before Pilate, that proud representative of Rome? When Jesus refused to answer one of his questions, Pilate asked him, "Do you not know that I have the power to crucify you?" {cf, John 19:10 KJV}. The Lord Jesus looked at him and said, "Thou couldst have no power except it be given thee from above" {cf, John 19:11 KJV}. That is, Pilate could not even lift a finger to crucify him if it were not permitted by God that he do so.

In Chapter 9 of this letter to the Romans, you remember, Paul tells us that God raised up Pharaoh, that wicked, hardhearted king, and set him on the throne of Egypt. God did that!

In the Old Testament we are told that

- It was God who gave Nebuchadnezzar power as the mightiest monarch who ever reigned on earth.
- And we are told that Cyrus, that cruel Chaldean lord, was his servant, raised up and set upon the throne by God.

All through the Old Testament God represents himself as the controlling force behind every government on earth, without exception.

So Paul is well within the authority of Scripture as he writes this word to us. In fact, when Paul wrote these words, the emperor seated on the throne of Rome was none other than the infamous Nero – and perhaps there has never been, in all the history of the world, a more cruel and malicious man to sit upon the seat of high power. Yet, when Paul wrote, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,” it was Nero who sat on the throne. Later, when Paul wrote to Timothy, and said, “Honor the king” {cf, 2 Pet 2:17}, it was Nero that he had in mind. All of this is simply confirmation of the statement that government is of God.

Therefore, it isn't man's elections or his revolutions that determine the governments of earth. We think it is –

- We get very busy holding elections,
- We campaign up and down,
- We have election night,
- We wait eagerly at the television set for all the returns,
- Then we get up all disappointed the next morning

– but it isn't really the election that has put these men into power.

In Mexico they used to do it by the process of revolution – you never could change the government there without a revolution. I wonder if they could, even today, change the government there without a revolution. Revolution is the process of the change of government in many parts of earth.

But neither elections nor revolutions determine who sits in the seats of power – it is God who does so. These things are only the instruments by which he works his will; and the revelation of Scripture is that God puts in power the men of his choosing, whether they be good or evil, whether they are beneficent rulers or tyrants like Hitler or Krushchev, or any of the others on earth. Somebody has said that God gives to each nation the government it deserves, and there is a great deal of truth in that.

I think that God, because of his mercy and love, does better than that, and we sometimes get a

government better than we deserve. At any rate, Scripture is clear that the governing authorities, the ones who occupy the seats of power, are there by the permissive choice of God.

If you struggle with that, it is because you don't see what is behind God's purpose in the world today. I think so many of us, even we Christians, suffer from the misconception that God is really making an all-out effort to try to govern the earth properly, and that he is having difficulty in doing so because of the recalcitrance and stubborn resistance of men – but he isn't. God isn't attempting to govern the earth properly today; he never has been. All through the span of human history, God has not been trying to govern the earth. No wonder people sometimes shake their head, and say,

“Well, I don't understand what is happening. I don't understand how God can permit these things. If I were governing the earth, I would never permit anything like that – and you tell me that God is a God of love and wisdom! Why, then, does he allow this kind of thing to go on?”

This is the question that so frequently comes from the human heart. It comes because we do not realize that God is not attempting to govern the earth properly – he is waiting, he is withholding, he is restraining evil, he is governing to a limited extent, – but he is not trying to do the job as he will someday.

He could have done it well all along; anytime that God chooses he can arrest the force of evil, and cancel out all the follies and failures of men, and set up a government that is right and perfect. He could have done this at any time in past history. But the fact that he doesn't, as Peter tells us, is evidence of his love and of his mercy and of his grace, which is withholding the judgment that is necessary in order that all may have a chance to hear the gospel of his grace.

Christians should remember that God is not only here on this earth to save. (We are so aware of that – we know that he has come to save – this is the great task primarily entrusted to those who are his visible manifestations on earth today. We who know the Lord, we who are the bodies possessed by the indwelling Spirit of God, have been given the task of declaring the word of reconciliation.) We know he has come to save, but that isn't all that

God has come to do in the world today – he is also here to restrain and limit evil (to keep it from coming to the full force of its ugly development), and to maintain his power and his truth among the nations.

Do you know that, in the recent Cuban crisis, if God had not allowed Krushchev to believe, at last, that the United States really meant business about the blockade, we would have been in nuclear war right now? It wasn't our clever strategy that finally convinced Krushchev that we were ready to fight down in Cuba, because there were many other times in the past when the same sort of attempts didn't work – it was simply the fact that God permitted him to believe something that was being set before him. And, if it were not for the permissive will of God, we would have been at war. It isn't the tremendous build-up of armament, or the political intrigue that a nation goes through, that keeps it at peace (necessary as these things may be, and are), but it is the control of God in the affairs of men and nations, and it is only the part of wisdom to recognize this.

This is what we have set forth here in the first great statement of the apostle: Every government that exists is held in the palm of God's hand. It can only go as far as God wills; it is under his control; it has been instituted by him. Because of this fact, Christians should have a great concern about governing authorities, for they are specially marked out by God as his territory, and, therefore, we can expect a special responsiveness to our witness among those who are God's servants. Three times in this passage, the government agencies are called "the servants of God" – especially his. Therefore, I believe that we who are Christians ought to be very much concerned that there be a forthright, clear-cut, powerful Christian testimony going out among men who are in positions of earthly power – because God says they are especially his, and we can expect a special responsiveness.

I was interested, during our breakfast meetings last April when the International Christian Leadership men were here in town, that the ones who seemed to respond most openly and enthusiastically to the witness of the gospel were men in positions of governmental authority here in this area. The city manager of Mountain View, who is a Roman Catholic, was very interested, and, as a result, that man is today leading a breakfast meeting on Friday mornings to which, at his invitation, men in executive areas of business and government are meeting

together to read the Scriptures. I was tremendously thrilled to have one of the men who was there last week say to me:

"You know, after the meeting last week, I was going down to my office and fire a man. But, as I was driving from the meeting, I reflected on our discussion together of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and I thought to myself, "If I fire this man, this will solve the problem for me, but I won't be helping him at all." This parable had gripped my heart; Jesus had made it clear that, when we see someone in need, we are to go to their aid. I went down to the office and, instead of calling that man in and firing him, as I fully intended to do, I sat down with him and we talked over the problem and I found out what the trouble was. The result was that we worked it all out, and he is going to make a good man I believe."

That is the ministry of "the salt of the earth" {Matt 5:13}, arresting corruption and restraining evil which would otherwise be at work. It is essential, therefore, that there be a Christian witness among government agencies and authorities.

In the Scriptures {see Acts 13:1}, we are told that there was a man in the church at Antioch named Manaen who was a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch (one of the government agencies from the court of Herod the king).

Also, when Paul and Barnabas went through the island of Cyprus {see Acts 13:7-12}, they sought Sergius Paulus, the proconsul and the ruler of the island, and bore a strong Christian witness to him which was opposed by Elymas the sorcerer. It was there that Paul called down the judgment of God on that man's head, and he became blind for a season, as he opposed the witness of these two men to this leader.

In the Philippian letter, remember how Paul writes about the saints who were in Caesar's household, {cf, Phil 4:22}? Somebody had reached into the emperor's household and won some people for the Lord there.

Then, at the end of this very letter to the Romans, we read of greetings sent to many people in Rome, among whom was Erastus, the city treasurer, {Rom 16:23 RSV}.

All through the Scriptures, then, you see how these men who were in positions of power were exposed to a Christian witness because the early

Christians recognized the truth that every government is authorized and instituted by God – it belongs to him.

Now, the second declaration of this passage is that the authorities are **God's instruments**:

Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoers. {Rom 13:2-4 RSV}

Twice in this passage the man in power is called "the servant of God," either to aid or avenge. In either case, he is doing God's work; therefore, to resist human authority is to resist God.

Of course, where human authority itself resists the direct command of God it is proper to rebuke it, and, if necessary, to disobey it. We have an example of this in the incident in Acts when the authorities commanded the apostles not to preach in the name of the Lord Jesus. Peter said, "Whether to obey God or man, you judge. You are God's servants. You are in a position of authority. Now you tell us, which should we obey, God or man? – for we cannot but speak in the name of the one by whom we were called, Jesus Christ," {cf, Acts 4:19-20}. They went out, then, and filled Jerusalem with their doctrine, and ceased not to preach and to teach everywhere that Jesus was the Christ {cf, Acts 4:19-31}. Here human government had overstepped its proper authority.

But, in general, governments are not a terror to good conduct, as the apostle says, but to bad conduct. If you want to have a clear conscience when you are working with the government, just behave yourself. Obey the laws and you don't need to have any fears – unless in the odd instance they come directly in conflict with some command of God, you need have no fear. Obey the laws and you can have a perfectly clear conscience, and can sleep nights. You don't have to worry about anybody coming to your door, or calling you up, or serving a warrant on you. You don't have to hide

behind doors or duck around corners, or cross the street when you see somebody coming. You can just walk through life with a perfectly clear conscience. This is what he says.

On the other hand, if you break the law, the authority is then the instrument of God to judge and punish you. It isn't the human element that is doing it, it is God that is doing it – through the instrumentality of a human being.

We were all interested to read in the paper last week about the president's sister being arrested for driving without a driver's license. Now, thank God we live in a country where the president's sister can be arrested. But, judging from the picture that appeared in the paper, she didn't enjoy it very much. She looked very gloomy as she was standing there before the judge. That judge, you see, had the authority from God to pass sentence – and a president's sister has no exemption from the law. Governments are of God.

Then someone may ask, "How far does this authority go?" Notice what Paul says in Verse 4: "He does not bear the sword in vain." That means that the authority extends to the right to take life, because that is what the sword does.

I think this puts the question of capital punishment in its right perspective. You see, capital punishment is not "legal murder" as some people call it, nor is it simply a relic of a more barbarous age (it is hard to understand how any age could be more barbarous than ours when you think in terms of the atomic bomb and so on), but it is the avenging hand of God himself operating through human instrumentality. When a criminal is executed for a crime, the executioner who pulls the switch (or drops the capsules into the acid) isn't the one who has taken the life. Nor is it even the state. It is God who has done it, and the state is simply the instrument by which God does his work and carries out his judgment on earth.

If you are driving down the street, and somebody bumps into you with their car, and smashes your fender, do you leap out and start complaining about the automobile and start beating the other car over the hood with a wrench? Are you angry at the automobile because it hit you? No! You go to work on the driver, don't you? It isn't the car that did it. It is the one that controls it, isn't it? It is foolish to blame the instrument. It is the one who controls it who is to blame.

I think we need to put this in the right perspective in regard to capital punishment because so much fog and haze has been created to obfuscate the issues. (I looked that word up especially: It means to cloud the issues and to make them difficult to see really clearly.) But Paul puts it in the right perspective, doesn't he? Capital punishment is the act of God in human society. Therefore, God is the one who must be called to account for this, if anybody is. It isn't "legal murder."

The last point that the apostle makes is that government agents are **God's intruders**:

Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. {Rom 13:5-7 RSV}

I think you will all agree that tax collectors are intruders. We feel that way, don't we?

You who are in business love to sit down and plan what you are going to do, and plan the profit that you are going to make – then there comes that disagreeable moment when you have to knock off 30% and realize that this has to be paid for taxes (or 90%, whatever the case may be). You wish that you could get out of it some way. We don't like this official arm that reaches into our business and extracts a good portion of our income, and says, "This is mine." But Paul says that these men who do this are God ministers.

This word *ministers* is an interesting word. It is the word employed everywhere in the New Testament for priests – "ministering priests." In fact, in Chapter 15 you have the same word. Paul uses it in Verse 16:

But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister [same word] of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, {Rom 15:15-16a RSV}

In the Old Testament, one of the duties of the priests was to receive tithes and offerings and sacrifices from the people. They were acting as God's

agents in receiving these tithes and offerings and sacrifices. Paul simply transfers that ministry and that work to the government, and says that governments have this right given to them by God to collect taxes, and that, in paying your taxes, you are paying properly authorized revenue to God – for these are his agents in carrying out this ministry. In other words, the power to tax is a God-given power.

Now, this doesn't mean that all taxes are just – I don't mean to claim that – but the principle of taxation is right, and, if there needs to be correction, machinery is usually available for the correction of unjust taxes.

Notice that this matter of paying taxes, among other things, is put under the matter of the realm of conscience. That is, Christians (for this whole passage concerns the attitude of Christians to government) are under a higher law than the world in regard to the demands of government. The worldling pays his taxes and obeys the laws largely because he fears the penalty, or he realizes that this is the only way that law and order can be maintained. But the Christian is put under a far higher responsibility; he is told to pay these things for the sake of conscience. That is, he knows that to fail to do this will affect his own relationship with God:

- If he cheats on his income tax, he has grieved the Holy Spirit and can no longer manifest the indwelling life of Jesus Christ in that ministry of power and conviction that glorifies God and makes the invisible God visible to man,
- If he is unjust in his treatment of government authorities, rude or crude in his dealings with them, or disrespectful (not giving "respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due" even through he doesn't like the man or his motives or methods) he is affecting his conscience and is under the disapproval of the grieved Holy Spirit within.

I think that this makes it clear that, ultimately, Christians pay taxes not to the government but to God.

Now, don't try to deduct them from your income tax on that basis – the Internal Revenue doesn't understand theology in this respect, but the Christian is expected to do so.

Not only do you pay taxes for your conscience sake, but for others' conscience sake as well:

- The way you treat government officials is a testimony of whether you are a Christian or not.
- The way you pay your taxes, if you pay them, and the way that you pay other revenues, custom duties, and fees of various sorts, is a testimony – one way or another – of your Christian life.

When I was in England, a man told me about an American speaker who came over there to speak. He was a prominent American Christian and he had been scheduled for a series of meetings. This man said that he met the speaker at the plane when he came in. As they were riding in from the airport to town, the man looked at his watch to see the time, and this fellow noticed that he had three watches on his arm. So he said to him, "What is the trouble? Do you have trouble telling time by one watch? Do you add them all up, or what?" And the man said, "No, I'll tell you: I found out there is a customs duty on the import of watches, so rather than put them in the suitcase where they would be found, I simply slipped them on my arm, and nobody noticed that they were there, and I came right through." The Englishman said, "You know, from that moment on, that man's ministry was a dead thing as far as I was concerned, and I noticed that there was nothing of blessing in his meetings all the time that he was here." You see, this sort of thing immediately touches the spiritual life of a believer and renders him inoperative as far as a testimony and a witness for Christ is concerned.

A great many Christians have been greatly blessed by the reading of books by Bishop O. H. Hallesby of Norway. I have been challenged and blessed by them myself, and Bishop Hallesby had a great ministry of writing that was a help and a strength to Christians around the world. His books were sold in many countries of the world. But, a few years ago, he was brought into court because of an income tax discrepancy, and it was proved that he had cheated on his income tax. As a result, his ministry absolutely ceased. Few of his books were sold any longer. Only those who hadn't heard of this bought his writings, but it was

publicized in *Time Magazine* and around the world, so that one act of attempting to evade his justified responsibility absolutely cut off his ministry; and he was placed on the shelf for the few remaining years of his life. He is dead now, but this is such a sharp testimony of what happens when we cheat, or don't play fair, in this area of life.

Again, all of this is placed in the context of the Christian's responsibility as he touches life around him. As we have been seeing all through Romans, especially in this last section, a Christian is simply a body in which Christ walks through this life.

When our Lord Jesus was here, he paid taxes. You remember he sent Peter down to the seaside to catch a fish once to take the money out of the fish's mouth to pay his tax {Matt 17:24-27}. He didn't have any money of his own, so this was the way his need was supplied.

On another occasion he took a penny and asked, "Whose is this superscription? Whose is this picture?" {cf, Matt 22:17-21, Mark 12:14-16, Luke 20:21-15}. And they said, "It is Caesar's." He said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

Now, when he was paying taxes,

- Was he not just as Spirit-filled and Spirit-empowered as when he raised Lazarus from the dead, or did any of his other miracles? Of course he was.
- Did he not need the fullness of an indwelling Father for that task as much as he needed it for anything else? Of course he did.

We also are to do all the necessary tasks of our life in the fullness of the indwelling life of Jesus Christ. We need the Spirit of God for everything that we do:

- If we pay our taxes and fill out our income tax report,
- If we treat government officials with respect,
- If we pay our fees and so on, and
- If we do this in dependence of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ within us,

this becomes a powerful, potent testimony that will have eternal effect in the lives, not only of these officials, but of those who observe us in our acts and our relationships to them. Thus, it becomes a powerful instrument to transform and change the society in which we live, and arrest the corruption and dispel the darkness that is about us.

The Christian, as we have seen here, is called to God-likeness. That is, as Major Thomas said, “making God visible in human life through the outworking of his indwelling life.” As we, even in little things, display honesty, and respect, and honor, and carefulness (not for the sake of some better relationship between the government and us, but because we are God’s men from head to foot), this thing becomes an instrument and a channel by which the Spirit of God opens doors, right and left. Thus, the influence of a Christian becomes a potent, vibrant, powerful testimony – a vigorous thing in the life of his community and beyond to that of the nation as well.

Prayer:

Our Father, we have been looking at these words of such intense practical import. There is little here to challenged the heart and lift up the eyes in spiritual vision, but, oh, so much of intense practical application of the truths that we have been learning and hearing out of the Word. We pray, therefore, as ones who are indeed citizens of heaven and walk through this world, that we may remember also that those men who sit in the seats of power, and who exercise authority in our cities and in our nation, are your servants. We pray then, Father, that our testimony, our experience, our relationship to them will be one in which your Spirit will find opportunity to be a channel of testimony and of transformation in their lives and in the lives of those who observe our relationship. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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